

Senate Leadership: Whip Organization

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Summary

The whip system performs two primary functions: to take responsibility for the mobilization of party Members for key votes and to serve as a conduit for information between party leaders and party Members.

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The whip system performs two primary functions: to take responsibility for the mobilization of party Members for key votes and to serve as a conduit for information between party leaders and party Members.

Role and Responsibility

Vote Mobilization. The chief responsibility of the whip is to “count heads.” The whips help their respective party leaders keep track of the whereabouts of Members in order to assist in the scheduling of legislation, in the case of the majority, or in the planning of opposition tactics, in the case of the minority.

Whips also “whip up” support for a party position. They try to build voting coalitions from disparate groups of party Members. They work with the other party leaders to fashion legislation that party Members will support. The whip is also expected to “get out the vote,” by making sure that Members will be present on the floor during close votes. Often, whips are stationed at the door leading to the chamber with “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” to indicate the party preference on the matter being voted on.

Information Dissemination. As part of an information dissemination function, whips prepare “advisories” to provide daily, weekly, or even yearly schedules. These notices address what measures are anticipated on the floor, the time for convening and expected adjournment of the chamber, and when, and on what amendments, votes might occur. Issue papers are also often provided by a whip office, although they are generally prepared in conjunction with the party conference. “Recess packets” are generated prior to a state work period, giving Senators information on major points the party wants stressed while Senators are at home.

Party Leadership. The whip, also called the assistant party leader, is considered a member of the official party leadership. As such, the whip works closely with the party leader to determine overall strategy, works for the passage or defeat of particular legislative initiatives, speaks during “leader time” on the floor on behalf of the party, deals with the press, and works with, or against, the White House on its specific initiatives.

Whip Organization

Each party whip is aided by a whip organization. The majority and minority whips are assisted by appointed chief deputy whips. The Democrats appoint one chief deputy whip and three deputy whips; the Republicans appoint one chief deputy whip, and seven deputy whips.

Table 1. Whip Offices

Type of Whip	Democrat	Republican
Whip/Assistant Party Leader	1	1
Chief Deputy Whip	1	1
Deputy Whips	3	7

At-large, also called assistant whips, often are selected to represent specific classes of members. Regional whip positions can also be created to represent and canvas Senators within a geographic region.

History

The term “whipper in” is a British term for the person responsible for keeping the foxhounds from leaving the pack. It was first used in the House of Commons in the late 1700s.

The Senate did not designate whips until the late nineteenth century. J. Hamilton Lewis (D-Ill.) became the first official whip in the Senate in 1913. The first Republican whip, James Wadsworth (R-NY) was appointed whip and conference secretary in 1915. One week later the Republicans decided to divide the two positions. Senator Wadsworth was replaced as whip by Senator Charles Curtis of Kansas.

The existence of a whip organization has changed through time, in part depending on the number of Members each party had in a particular Congress. In years when a party had only 30 or 40 Senators, for example, the party whip often did not create deputy or assistant whips.

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